

IV. ACHIEVING THE VISION

THE BOROUGH

A. INTRODUCTION

The Borough is the Historic Heart of Newtown. It contains shopping areas, numerous local businesses, municipal facilities, churches, beautiful single family detached homes and the Flag Pole. The Borough forms a very powerful visual image that adds to the perception of Newtown's community character. Collectively, these features of Newtown's built environment combine to provide a key focal point of "community" within the Town.

The 1993 Plan of Development (POD) identified the importance of the Borough within the Town and suggested a series of recommendations to preserve and enhance the Borough's historic role as the Center of Town. The following section is largely excerpted from the 1993 POD.

B. BACKGROUND

Existing Conditions

The intersection of Queen Street with Route 6 (Church Hill Road) developed as the main commercial area in Newtown. It is the location of two shopping centers - Eton Plaza, which has become partially vacant since the preparation of the 1993 POD and the Newtown Shopping Center, which has been substantially renovated since the 1993 POD - as well as numerous shops and offices offering convenience goods and services. In addition to the shopping centers, many businesses are located in small, detached, previously residential buildings or in single or multiple tenant commercial buildings.

There are two public schools and one private school which add to the mixed nature of land uses in the area. The Hawley School is an elementary school located opposite the Eton Plaza. The Newtown middle school is located south of Eton Plaza on Queen Street and the St. Rose of Lima private school is located further east on Church Hill Road (Route 6).

The south side of Church Hill Road is zoned for retail and general business uses. A portion of the north side of Church Hill is zoned for professional uses which permits residences and professional offices. The remainder of the area is zoned for one acre residential uses.

Findings

The area has developed in a generally uncoordinated fashion which has resulted in a mixture of building types and forms, lack of uniform setbacks and symmetry among building locations and numerous, repetitive driveway curb cuts. The area suffers from its ambivalent roles as an automobile oriented shopping center and retail and service center for the surrounding neighborhood. The area fulfills neither of these roles very satisfactorily. The area is neither truly pedestrian oriented, nor does it function adequately for automobile circulation. The presence of a young student population aggravates a concern for pedestrian safety. These issues combine to create a challenging climate for the prosperity of businesses.

With the installation of sewer service, this area has the potential to become a multi-function village center with shops, services, and places of entertainment which serve not only the surrounding neighborhood, but all of Newtown, and visitors to Newtown and to the nearby, historic Main Street area.

C. VILLAGE CENTER PLAN

The objectives of a village center plan should be as follows:

- Improve automobile and pedestrian access and circulation.
- Create opportunities for the expansion of businesses and the creation of new businesses.
- Improve the image of the business area for residents and visitors.

A detailed design plan which takes into account existing and future development and environmental constraints should be prepared. The fundamental elements of a plan for the Village Center are described as follows:

1. Land Uses

- Land uses should encourage a broad mixture of small businesses catering to local retail and service needs, and the needs of visitors to Newtown.
- The center would be reinforced with some entertainment uses and public gathering areas such as a common.
- The area also should feature business, professional and medical offices which may be attracted to smaller scale buildings or converted residences.
- Residential uses should be permitted on the second floor of retail businesses, and home/office combinations should be encouraged. Development sites adjacent to residential areas may be used for affordable housing.

2. Village Design

- The center should be designed to convey a village feeling. Buildings should be set close to the street with a minimum and a maximum setback to achieve uniformity. Setbacks on Queen Street should be closer to the roadway than those on Church Hill Road.
- As is evident on Main Street, a range of building styles is appropriate. However, the use of natural materials and building forms that draw upon local architectural conventions should be encouraged.
- Overhead utility lines should be removed and placed underground.

3. Circulation

Among the most pressing issues with regard to the village center is access to businesses and pedestrian and vehicular movement throughout the area. A substantial redesign of circulation patterns is proposed which incorporates the principles of traditional community design.

- A loop collector road which will provide alternative access to existing businesses and access to additional development sites surrounding the current core of shops and offices.
- A coordinated internal circulation system among parking areas and business locations.
- Sidewalks on both sides of Queen Street and Church Hill Road. These sidewalks should connect the center to the Main Street area and to surrounding residential areas.
- Curb cuts and driveways should be limited along Queen Street and Church Hill Road. The new collector road should function to provide access to Developments.
- A fully activated traffic signal with left turn indicators should be preserved at Church Hill Road and Queen Street. Partially activated, peak hour signals may be required for intersections with the new loop road.

(The following Figure 10B is taken from Newtown's 1993 Plan of Development. This drawing illustrates the proposed pattern of circulation for the Village Center area of the Borough.)

4. Parking

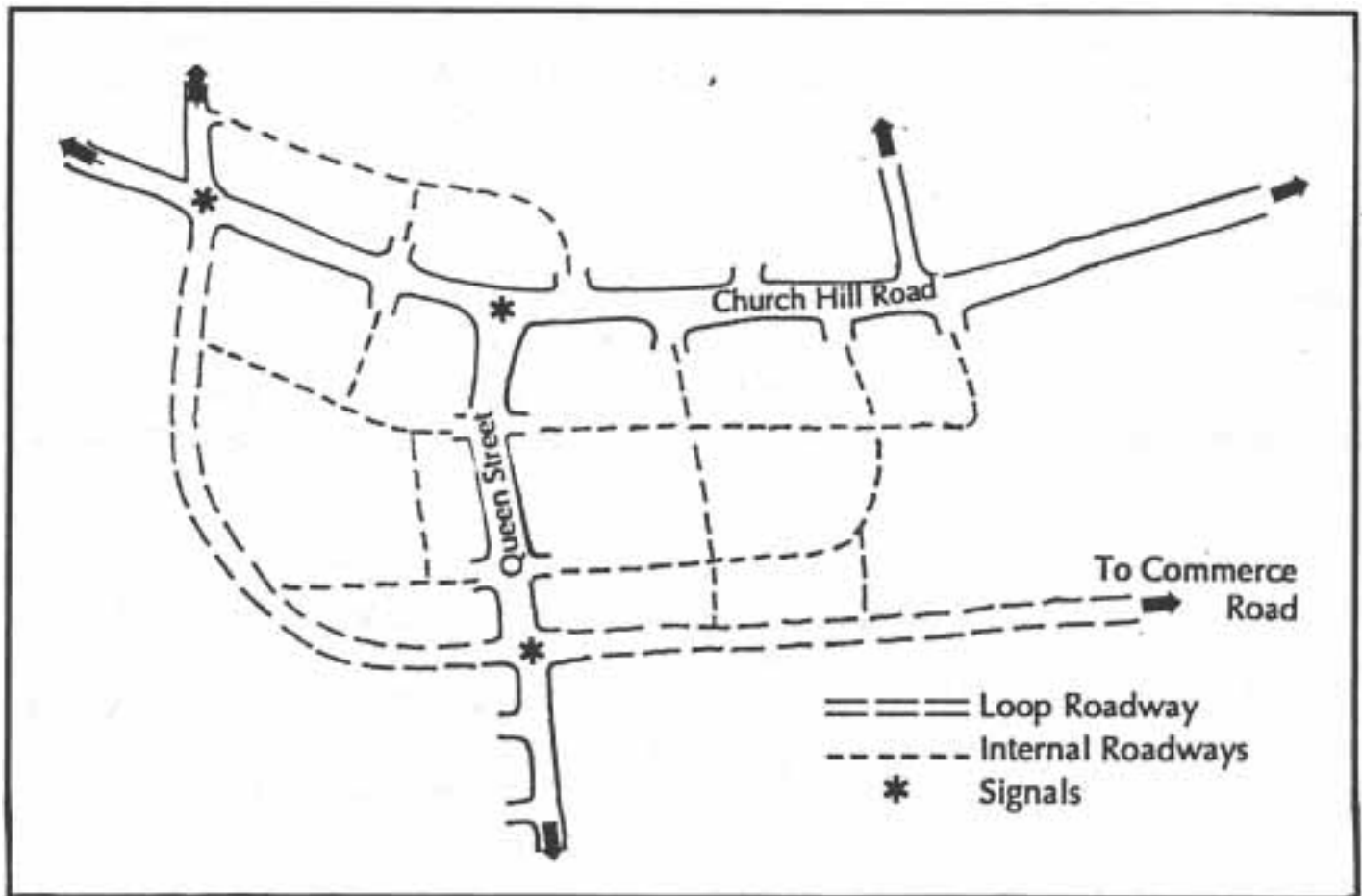


Figure 10B: Concept Circulation Plan for Village Center

- Major parking areas should be located to the side or rear of buildings. It is recognized that some service parking, loading and unloading may be required adjacent to buildings.
 - Parking areas should be consolidated voluntarily by property owners to improve access and efficiency.
5. Streetscape/Landscape
- Tree strips should be preserved along Church Hill Road, Queen Street and the new collector. Street trees of native varieties should be provided at a minimum of 30 to 40 feet on center.
 - Landscaping should be provided at the periphery and within parking areas in order to break up expanses of parking.
 - Street trees should be provided in parking areas at a minimum of one tree per 300 square feet of area.
 - Street furniture, benches, signage and other pedestrian oriented amenities should be incorporated into the plan to encourage drivers to park their cars and stroll around the area.
6. Implementation

In order to move the plan forward, an entity should be formed which can guide public improvements and encourage appropriate development. A public-private partnership should be formed of business and government interests to advocate specifically for the village center.

A special assessment district is another mechanism for funding improvements. Using this mechanism, businesses would be permitted to tax themselves for the funding of improvements which are in the common interest. As a broader incentive, the Town could offer tax relief through deferrals for improvements. Zoning incentives could also be effective. Density bonuses could be granted to businesses which provide for public amenities.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Borough Zoning Commission and the Newtown Planning and Zoning Commission use the above materials as a reference when considering planning proposals for this area of the Borough. This information should be useful to the Borough's utilization of the recently adopted Village District Regulations as an additional tool to manage change.